

It's odd for a documentary and a dramatic film about the same topic to be released in the same year. It's also strange when the Hollywood production — easily able to play around with the story and use actors' talents to make the characters bigger than life — comes across flatter and less interesting than the documentary.

But that's the case in comparing "Casino

Jack," which stars Kevin Spacey as crooked Washington lobbyist Jack Abramoff, with the terrific Alex Gibney documentary "Casino Jack and the United States of Money," which was released last spring.

Gibney's film used facts and real footage to tell the story of Abramoff's incredible rise and abrupt fall. The Hollywood movie makes the mistake of letting Spacey get away with being too earnest, too glib, too charming, too ... Spacey. His Abramoff is a greedy, unrepentant capitalist who will lie as much as he has to in order to get what he wants. That would be a combination of money and power.

What could have been a fascinating character study turns out to be some time spent with a wholly unlikable person, played by Spacey, without looking for a shred of audience sympathy coming his way. You want only the worst to happen to him, and while that could make for some fun viewing, there's no mirth in Norman Snider's straightforward script.

Abramoff, who just finished up a six-year federal prison sentence last month, is shown from the film's get-go to be full of himself, alone in a room, staring into a mirror, pontificating out loud about how great he is. Then he's being photographed at a federal holding facility, after two worlds have collapsed: his own and that of his business partner, Mike Scanlon (Barry Pepper).

The story shoots back to two years earlier, when Abramoff is getting his lobbying skills in shape, taking money from groups or organizations or companies to, in return, influence members of Congress. It's a practice that's legal, depending, of course, on how the complex game is played.

For instance, is it really legal to get political favors in return for five-star restaurants, fancy hotels and golf at expensive and faraway courses? But forget about words like "legal." Is it

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Written by Administrator

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moral to call these kinds of things “congressional fact-finding missions?”

“Casino Jack” gets its name from Abramoff’s involvement with different Indian tribes -- opening up gambling destinations and, oh, by the way, pitting some of the tribes against each other, all the while taking large checks for his trouble. No, wait, make that for his consulting expertise.

There’s also some shady stuff with clothing factories in the Marianas Islands and a way for Abramoff and Scanlon to make big bucks in a Florida-based offshore gambling outfit. But that will only work if even sleazier people are brought in to oversee things.

The film works fine in that area, with Jon Lovitz pulling off a wonderfully wormy performance as Adam Kidan, who is called on to check out the offshore casino operation and proceeds to become even more hated than Abramoff.

Unfortunately, there’s no screen chemistry between Spacey and Pepper. Every scene they’re in together feels too planned out, too acted. There’s no spontaneity, even though this is a story of these two guys thinking fast on their feet. In fact, most of the film seems to be directed with a heavy hand, with separate sequences feeling too mannered, too lacking in subtlety.

When things start spinning out of control for our anti-heroes, there’s almost a feeling of relief. Well, at least until Spacey gets into some heavy-duty melodrama when his wife confronts him about his activities and he starts confessing to her.

To its credit, the film does offer a nicely done re-creation of Senate hearings headed up by John McCain, a well-placed Imelda Marcos gag (and you sure can’t get too many of those) and a magic moment when one character refers to George W. Bush as an idiot.

CASINO JACK (R for language, some violence and brief nudity.) Cast includes Kevin Spacey, Barry Pepper and Jon Lovitz. Directed by George Hickenlooper. 2 stars out of 4.

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